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William Rueckert

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Into and Out of the Void: Two Essays · William Rueckert

I. Boxed in the Void: An Essay on the Late Sixties in America

1/History as Symbol

W H A T E V E R else it is, history has something to do with time and history as symbol has to do with human conceptions of time. In the simplest possible terms, empirically understood, as applicable to every living thing (human or non-human), time is always linear and narrative: it moves from some beginning into the present and toward the future where an individual ending must always occur. All individual living things are subject to this irrevocable, irreversible, linear time-factor. There is a coming into BEING from some source, which must always be followed by the going out of BEING into the unknowable. We do not really know much about how other living things conceive time and the loss of being or lapse into non-being; but human conceptions of time are not separable from ontology and eschatology; and historiography, approached and understood in its symbolic dimensions, is always cosmological. Ontology, or individual being, and cosmology, or universal being, the largest possible context for individual being, are the two poles of this topic. Some of Blake's drawings show the Cosmos generated from individual BEING; earlier and other artists show the individual generated from cosmic BEING. Either way, this symbolic iconography and these fancy terms—all with mighty resonances—have meaning and relevance only so long as WE keep our vantage point clear: TIME does not care about humans and does not suffer from human or historical consciousness; TIME was, is, and will be—with perfect indifference—regardless of our attempts even to impose these simple grammatical forms upon it. It is humans who care about time and suffer, have suffered, will always suffer, in an acute way, from historical consciousness: cosmology, history, self, identity, ontology, nature, generation, existence, degeneration, and the unknowable beyond are all things which the anguished historical consciousness of man, boxed into his own present, worries about and suffers from.

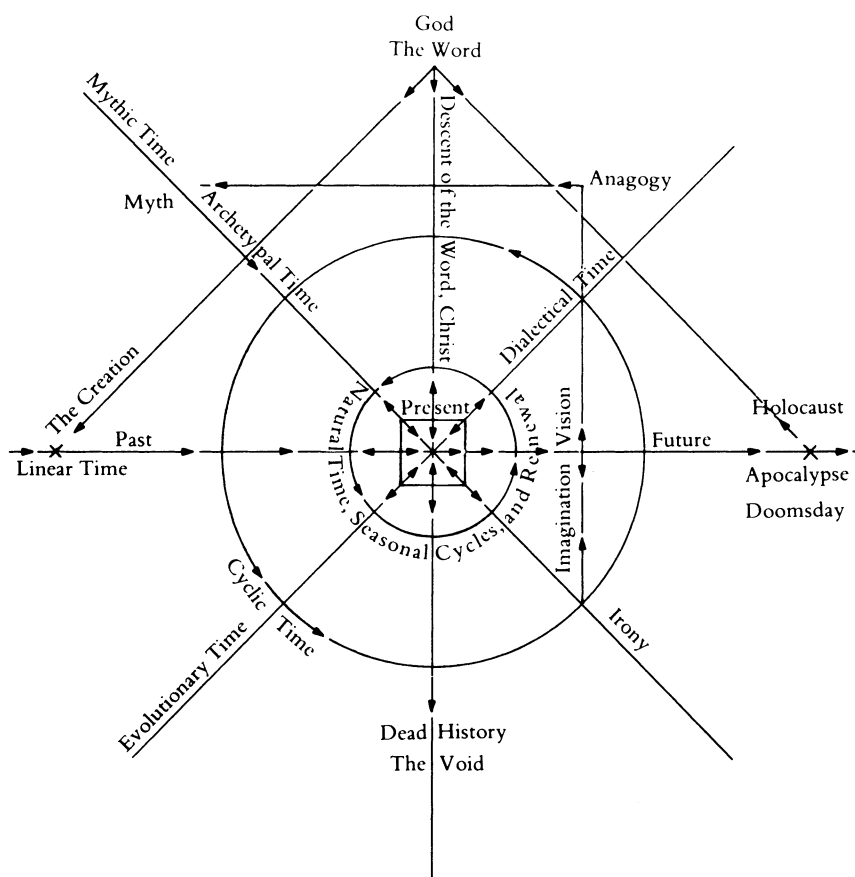
History as symbol or symbolic (in the pluralistic sense) is the creation of man's historical consciousness working in conjunction with the conceptual, abstractive, imaginative, and symbolic centers of his mind. There seem to be a number of contradictory motives always at work: one, as it is so beautifully stated in Ellison's *Invisible Man*, is the revolutionary motive, which is the need to get into history, become a part of it and have the capacity to shape and alter it. Another is to get out of history, to find a way not to be merely a victim of history and time. This is the motive one finds in Eliot's "Ash Wednesday" and *Four Quartets*. Another motive is to avoid

stasis, to get into history and flow with it toward the future and into the new, the unknown. One finds this motive in the work of W. C. Williams, Lawrence, and especially in Whitman. Another motive is simply to know history because history, in spite of the appearances of change, is essentially repetitive (*plus ça change*) and all the human and historical possibilities have already realized themselves in one form or another in the past. To know history, then, is to acquire usable knowledge for the present and future. This is, and has always been, a strong humanistic motive; it is present in different ways in the work of Matthew Arnold and Northrop Frye. Finally, to mention only one more motive before moving on, there is, in addition to the revolutionary motive to change history, or the transcendent motive to somehow get out of history and into eternity, or the immersion motive to enter history and flow into the future, or the cognitive motive to know and use a set of completed historical possibilities, there is, in addition to these, the motive of ironic and stoical resignation to the fact that history has exhausted all viable and generative possibilities so that any historical action (revolution, immersion, or cognition) is an absurdity. This view is strongly present in the work of Katherine Anne Porter, Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and many Faulkner novels. History is not a nightmare here from which we must awaken, but a corpse, a wasteland, a void, a ship of fools, a world in which there are no sanctuaries, a sterile and impotent self, an ontological cemetery, a catalogue of dead visions and dreams. Revolution, Transcendence, Immersion, Cognition, and ironic resignation: each of these is an attitude toward history in which the symbolic content of history changes, along with the motives and actions open to the individual self. I have isolated the attitudes and motives in their purity in order to characterize them quickly; but of course they often mix, so that one gets, as in W. C. Williams's *In the American Grain* and *Paterson*, a marvelous combination of immersion and cognition, the result of which is revolution.

2/The Model

The leisurely and pleasant approach used above could be protracted through many texts and different attitudes toward history. But we have a certain interest in economy here. So, in order to discuss the topic in a second, but related way, I have made a diagrammatic model which condenses some of the human conceptions of time and history I want to talk about:

The box inside the two circles, where all the lines transect each other, is the present; to the left is the past, to the right is the future, above is the timeless, eternal realm, and below (eventually) is the void. Three kinds of beginnings are indicated: the rising diagonal line is evolutionary time, which begins, without cause, in a past too distant to contemplate, in space too far



away or diffuse to locate, and rises or evolves slowly toward human forms and beyond. It can keep going, as in Whitman's "Passage to India," where it moves endlessly toward greater and greater perfection on a cosmic and individual scale; or it can level off at a certain point; or it can be transformed into dialectical time, as one finds it in Hegelian or Marxian views of history, where evolution is assigned specific utopian ends (such as the classless society) so that it can be conceived as completing itself at some point in the future.

The level horizontal line is linear time, neither evolutionary nor mythic, but also going backward into indeterminacy just as it goes forward into infinity: it neither begins nor ends, but always WAS, IS, and WILL BE. It is the time into which individuals are born, in which they exist, and from which they depart. That is one kind of linear time. But there is also Christian linear time, which begins with God's creation of the universe and all living things out of Himself. Time, as such, begins with the Creation; man and spirit are inserted into time and matter at the Creation, so

that both matter and spirit, time and the timeless exist together. The possibility of moving in and out of time, of redeeming time and being redeemed from time come into existence with the Incarnation when the WORD is made flesh and a permanent WAY or MEDIATION is established between the timeless and time, the WORD and words, God and man. In addition, linear time, which began with the Creation, will end with the apocalypse, so that the whole cosmic coming into being is completed with a cosmic going out of being; and History or Time, has a beginning and an end. Again, the future is taken care of in this way with great thoroughness, even though, as Kermode wittily points out, the apocalypse is always kept movable.

Evolutionary time is essentially open-ended; non-Christian linear time is similarly open-ended; Christian linear time is closed, and in the diagram it is enclosed in the triangle, beginning and ending with God. The genius of Christian time is the Incarnation and the mediating function of Christ, which makes it possible, so long as linear time endures, to get out of time, and at the end of time (doomsday, the apocalypse) to achieve an eternal and perfect ontology.

Mythic time, indicated by the falling diagonal line, begins with the Gods, who had no beginning, and, as in the first chapter of Frye's *Anatomy*, descends down a hierarchy toward man and always keeps going downward until it bottoms out at the lowest level of human possibility. In Frye, this level is reached in the ironic phase and in man's conception of hell. Mythic time, moreover, is almost always conceived in archetypal terms and according to a completely ahistorical motive. Thus this view of time and history is enclosed in another triangle, one which allows for continuous human renewal by an action of the mythic imagination. When the old gods die, man creates new ones; when man reaches bottom, he renews himself by an effort of imagination and recycles, as in Frye, back to the top (the anagogic level). Bachelard and Eliade are the great theorists of this view of history.

Two other views of time and history are indicated in the diagrammatic model, and both are attempts to avoid the line that plunges straight downward from the present toward dead history and the void. Linear and evolutionary time can both come to this downward plunging line and abort the future by plunging into the void or simply by dying out as a set of viable and generative human alternatives. Cyclic theories of history are too common for me to labor here; in terms that I have been using, they make a circle out of past linear history so that linear time continues without end by endlessly repeating a fixed set of preexisting possibilities. Change is accounted for by the fact that the form or cycle is fixed but the specific historical matter changes. Vast historical cycles unto doomsday have also been worked out, so that linear time is completely eliminated; and history moves, irreversibly, through its single cycle toward holocaust or cataclysm.

Linear time can also be viewed as moving toward a similar, inevitable holocaust or cataclysm as in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Neither of these views aborts the future; both, in R. D. Laing's terms, make it unthinkable, one by way of a doomsday cycle and the other (very common today) by a doomsday causality.

Now, to the inner circle around the box at the center of the diagram. The outer circle represents various closed cyclic theories of history, all of which move into and out of natural time. The inner circle is meant to represent the natural seasonal cycles, or the repeating cycles of nature (which is why it is the innermost circle), and, when transformed into a human conception of time and history, to yield some kind of organic view of both. When human conceptions are joined to natural time, one gets what might be called the composting or ecological view of time and history, and it is quite distinct from either evolutionary or linear time and history. The matter is not easy to state accurately, but it goes something like this: man comes into being, as other creatures do and has what might be called the same species-rights as they do and is, as they are, part of an environment. When the individual's time comes and he is ready to become garbage or carrion, he is composted, recycled, which was the common American Indian way of doing things, and is beautifully rendered in *The Bear* when Sam Fathers, Ben, and Lion die, or in a book like Farley Mowat's *People of the Deer*, an account of a vanishing Eskimo tribe. And, of course, it is the way nature does things: everything continues to be part of the ongoing organic species-life. Dylan Thomas wrote some magnificent poems on this subject near the end of his life—"Poem in October," for example. Recently, W. S. Merwin, Galway Kinnell, and Gary Snyder have meditated (poetically) very profoundly upon the relation of humans to natural time in an attempt to arrive at a human ecology which avoids or transcends the essential status quo (leave everything as it is) of natural ecology. Ian McHarg in his *Design with Nature* has also tried to do this on a large scale—or in a way which makes it possible to move from ecology to ontology to cosmology and provides a way of breaking out of the closed inner circle of nature without destroying the earth (or the universe) with human effluents, affluence, and technology.

3/The Examples

And now for closure, by way of some current examples. Boxed (necessarily) into the present, man has created, tried, and taken many symbolic ways out of the present, including, paradoxically, the decision to stay in the box. There are eight ways indicated out of the box, and a ninth may be added if one includes the common modern decision to believe and act in and for only the immediate present. My examples all refer to these nine possibilities, each of which treats history as symbolic in a different way.

My students tell me that the Revolution was executed at Kent State by the United States Army and blown to bits by our sophisticated weaponry

in Vietnam. They tell me that Emerson and Whitman's America is a corpse and that if they immerse themselves in that history they will only flow into our sewers of effluents toward the cataclysm. Susan Sontag said that when she looked back from her vantage point in the present, all she could see were 6,000,000 dead Jews in the concentration camps and 40,000,000 more dead soldiers and civilians from World War II; that when she looked ahead, all she could see was the human and technologically caused total holocaust and more death, on an unprecedented scale; looking up, all she could see was the death-dealing word (human reason) and the dead WORD; and looking down, the usual abyss, the void—not hell, just nothing, an absence of human purpose, even as the effects of destructive human purpose continue their work of lethal pollution. If history has any symbolism here, it is surely the death's-head: not mortality, but an active principle of human caused carnage and destruction. What is left, then? One cannot look back, up, forward, or down; one has no interest in transcendence (the WORD is dead, anyway), or in the void (to what end, suicide?). What is left is an erotics of the self, self-gratifying styles of radical will, sexuality and aesthetics, a sensuous life which acknowledges only the present and the life of the self in it, and the principle of non-destructiveness (either creation for its own sake or a creative life style). Boxed into the present with everything else become a void (or worse, an active death-dealing force), one stays in the box and lives only there. Historical consciousness is refused, denied, ignored; and by acts of the will one does not think about the past or, especially, the future. An erotics of the self is most completely possible in the great cities and in urban centers generally; but there is an ecological variant of it which one finds in the communes, the back-to-earth movement generally, and in the whole craft movement. Since one cannot withdraw from history except by literally removing oneself from it by suicide, one has to describe the attitude toward history here as either ahistorical or traumatic; in any event, positive symbolisms of history are rejected as absurd and untrue, negative symbolisms of history are rejected as self-destructive, and an attempt is made to live in such a way as to minimize historical consciousness—the very condition out of which human conceptions of history and the future are generated. It makes for a curious situation, to say the least.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, for example, Vonnegut has Billy Pilgrim come unstuck in time so that he can free him from the tyranny of the space/time continuum, and the limitations of the human perspective (which, the Tralfamadorians tell Billy, is like looking through a long, narrow pipe, with your head immobilized by a steel helmet which allows you only to look forward, and with your body strapped onto a railroad flat car which is moving only forward, slowly). Spastic in time, Billy knows his own future; he knows how and when he will die, which in good Vonnegut style, is for something he didn't do; from the Tralfamadorians, he learns how the

cosmos will die, which is by accident, when a Tralfamadorian pilot pushes the wrong button on his spaceship. What messages do we get from this time-traveler with the eschatological knowledge: he tells us with sweet irony (in this fiction of horrors), remember the nice things, concentrate on the pleasant experiences, listen to the birds. The point is that history, here, as in Sontag, and for many of my students, is destruction (the fire-bombing of Dresden where 135,000 people died and the whole city was turned into a moonscape) culminating in cataclysm (where the whole cosmos is blown up accidentally by the Tralfamadorians, experimenting with new fuels for their spaceships). Billy is taken out of his box by Vonnegut and discovers that time and human history are a vast slaughterhouse.

Vonnegut has little interest in the distant past or the Creation: the obsessive concern of his (and our) generation is the future. A few thinkers, like McLuhan and Fuller, following the old evolutionary utopian line of thought, have managed to project a future out of exactly those aspects of the present that horrify so many other writers. But for many of us in our time, the garden of Eden has long been covered with Astroturf and domed over. Faulkner knew this in the early forties, which did not diminish the purity and appeal of Ike's commitment. I look at my four young sons, all moving ahead and wonder what I can or should teach them to prepare them for this unthinkable future. Certainly not to become Ike McCaslin. Anyway, they don't even believe in killing anything. I listen to my students and wonder what I should or can teach them, when so many are freaked out of time on drugs, bombed out of the world on their music, and absorbed in sensual and immediate body-life. They tell me that the revolutionary books I have them read (by Laing, Cleaver, Peter Weiss, George Jackson, N. O. Brown, Slater, and Marcuse) and the kinds of poems and novels I have them read (*The Tin Drum*, *The Cannibal*, *The Painted Bird*, *V.*, *Crow*, *Lice*, *Second Skin*, *Naked Lunch*) are driving them mad—and they mean that quite literally. They do not want to think about revolution; they do not want to experience any more horrors, even in books. In some ways, they want what Billy Pilgrim tells them is valuable: the nice things, the pleasant experiences, the birds singing. Madness is a constant threat to them; individual and small group survival is their primary concern, so they turn to ecology, erotics, crafts and extreme forms of transcendence, and various, mostly quite private, creative acts.

Boxed into a present from which it seems impossible to project a thinkable, bearable human future, from the past, from the present, or from any other source, the future and past, time and eternity, parent and child, nation and citizen are cleaved apart and life contracts upon the individual self in the present in extraordinary ways. If history is a symbol of anything in this situation, it is futility, helplessness, despair—or at its most extreme, the VOID, without, within. It is opening the box to find an empty box, to find within that another empty box, ad infinitum. History loses its generative

symbolism because, like *Bartleby the Scrivener*, humans prefer not to develop historical consciousnesses and so abort new conceptions of human time, new visions of history. The future is dead, and no one wants to bring it back to life.

Individual life styles—ecological, erotic, rural and urban—extreme forms of transcendence by way of drugs (Kesey, LSD), by way of religion (the Jesus freaks), extreme forms of revolution and violence (the Manson family), and extreme forms of creation, proliferate as individual actions against the void within, without, behind, above, below, and worse, up ahead. The war never ends, the killing never stops, the pollution always increases, the population grows. The fundamental question is not, as it once was, what price glory, but what use history, what use knowledge, to what end historiography or real power?

The problem is not the past, nor is it the present. Generative life styles are the easiest thing to achieve in our time: there are thousands of alternatives, there is still room somewhere, and somewhere everything is possible. The problem is the future. Everything is fine until one loses his absorption in the present, the endeavors and pleasures of the present—such as writing this position paper—and thinks about or into the future. But how can any teacher or parent, artist, critic, or philosopher, scientist or psychoanalyst, and especially any historian avoid the future? To think that the past will deliver the future to us (again!) has become patently absurd. All the future utopias generated by technology and art are anti-utopias; they are monstrosities in some way and among the most terrifying creations and inventions ever to come from the human psyche. (And this includes such marvelous creations as Brown's *Love's Body* and Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*; McLuhan's *War and Peace in the Global Village* or Fuller's *I Thought I Was A Verb*). None of us listed in the professions above can avoid or turn back from historical consciousness. The more we know and study, the worse it becomes. And unless we really do believe in the positive and therapeutic value of corrosive irony and negative knowledge, what are we to do with this consciousness of where we are in history and where, irreversibly, we seem to be going. Boxed in the VOID and aware above all else that the future will be, whatever we do, I end with what seems to me the essential question.

For the future, what is history symbolic of; what symbolic construct can we make or create to guide our actions; what vision or visions can we leave our children and students? Reading Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman now makes one yearn to have been born in the early nineteenth century; but that is idleness and necrophilia. The greening of America was already fatally diseased in the nineteenth century by one of the most ferocious imperial motives ever conceived; moving west, the direction of the future, this imperial motive destroyed everything in its way. As Philip Slater has pointed out in *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, America has been the most destructive

nation in history, and it has always headed west. Even now, moving out westward in all directions (the moon and beyond are west), it continues in its habitual ways in the name of progress, in the name of the future, in the name of historical destiny.

4/Postscript

Letter to Walt Whitman

Third Month, 1974

Dear Walt,

Where are you, poet of democracy?
Something is wrong this year.
Something was wrong last year, and the year before.
Things have not worked out the way you said they would.
The seas are all crossed and we have come to Watergate.

Our president lies to us, Walt.
His cabinet lies to us.
His staff lies to us.
The synthetic man is taking over everything
Extending his ego into all of our environments.
The passage, Walt, the passage to more than India—
How do we find that?

The president tells us everything will be O.K.
But it is lies, all lies, Walt—
From Washington, from Maryland, from Florida, from California.

We have sent men to the moon.
Our ships have been to Mars.
And one has even sailed into the unknown reaches of space.
But our energy is low, Walt.
We are running out of fuel.
Our ideals are failing us.
Everything is being manipulated.

Even your poems are failing us, Walt.
Nobody can remember when lilacs last in the dooryard bloomed.
And nobody has crossed on Brooklyn ferry for fifty years.

If a child goes forth, someone will molest him.
The open road is crowded with trucks

And nobody dares rock the cradle anymore.
Your songs, Walt, we can hardly hear them over the rock bands.
If we loaf, they imprison our souls.
Your leaves of grass are dying of herbicides.

Come back, Walt,
Sing in our time
Make America poetic again.

We need your largeness
In these mean times.

Come back, Camerado,
And sing us to ourselves.

Your Lost Son.

II. Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism

"It is the business of those who direct the activities that will shape tomorrow's world to think beyond today's well being and provide for tomorrow."

—Raymond Dasgmann
Planet in Peril

"Any living thing that hopes to live on earth must fit into the ecosphere or perish."

—Barry Commoner
The Closing Circle

"... the function of poetry. . . . is to nourish the spirit of man by giving him the cosmos to suckle. We have only to lower our standard of dominating nature and to raise our standard of participating in it in order to make the reconciliation take place. When man becomes proud to be not just the site where ideas and feelings are produced, but also the cross-road where they divide and mingle, he will be ready to be saved. Hope therefore lies in a poetry through which the world so invades the spirit of man that he becomes almost speechless, and later reinvents language."

—Francis Ponge
The Voice of Things

1/Shifting our locus of motivation

WHERE HAVE we been in literary criticism in my time? Well, like Count Mippipopolus in *The Sun Also Rises*, we seem to have been everywhere, seen and done everything. Here are just some of the positions and

battles which many of us have been into and through: formalism, neo-formalism, and contextualism; biographical, historical, and textual criticism; mythic, archetypal, and psychological criticism; structuralism and phenomenology; spatial, ontological, and—well, and so forth, and so forth. Individually and collectively, we have been through so many great and original minds, that one wonders what could possibly be left for experimental criticism to experiment with just now—in 1976.

Furthermore, there are so many resourceful and energetic minds working out from even the merest suggestion of a new position, that the permutations of even the most complex new theory or methodology are exhausted very quickly these days. If you do not get in on the very beginning of a new theory, it is all over with before you can even think it through, apply it, write it up, and send it out for publication. The incredible storehouse of existing theories and methods, coupled with the rapid aging (almost pre-aging, it seems) of new critical theories and methods, has made for a somewhat curious critical environment. For those who are happy with it, a fabulously resourceful, seemingly limitless, pluralism is available: there is something for everybody and almost anything can be done with it. But for those whose need and bent is to go where others have not yet been, no matter how remote that territory may be, there are some problems: the compulsion toward newness acts like a forcing house to produce theories which are evermore elegant, more baroque, more scholastic, even, sometimes, somewhat hysterical—or/and, my wife insists, testesical.

I don't mean to ridicule this motive; in fact, I have recently defended it rather energetically.¹ I'm really reminding myself of how things can go in endeavors such as this one, so that I can, if possible, avoid the freakism and exploitation latent in the experimental motive. Pluralism, a necessary and valuable position, which is not really a position at all, has certain obvious limitations because one always tries to keep up with what's new but must still work always with what has already been done and is already known. So what is to be done if one wants to do something that is worth doing, that is significant; if one is suffering from the pricks of historical conscience and consciousness; wanting to be "original," to add something new, but wanting to avoid the straining and posturing that often goes with this motive, and above all, wanting to avoid the Detroit syndrome, in which the new model is confused with the better or the intrinsically valuable. Whatever experimental criticism is about, the senseless creation of new models just to displace or replace old ones, or to beat out a competitor in the intellectual marketplace should not be the result. To confuse the life of the mind with the insane economy of the American automobile industry would be the worst thing we could do.

The more I have thought about the problem, the more it has seemed to me that for those of us who still wish to move forward out of critical pluralism, there must be a shift in our locus of motivation from newness, or

theoretical elegance, or even coherence, to a principle of relevance. I am aware that there are certain obvious hazards inherent in any attempt to generate a critical position out of a concept of relevance, but that is what experiments are for. The most obvious and disastrous hazard is that of rigid doctrinal relevance—the old party-line syndrome. I have tried to avoid that. Specifically, I am going to experiment with the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature, because ecology (as a science, as a discipline, as the basis for a human vision) has the greatest relevance to the present and future of the world we all live in of anything that I have studied in recent years. Experimenting a bit with the title of this paper, I could say that I am going to try to discover something about the ecology of literature, or try to develop an ecological poetics by applying ecological concepts to the reading, teaching, and writing about literature. To borrow a splendid phrase from Kenneth Burke, one of our great experimental critics, I am going to experiment with the conceptual and practical possibilities of an apparent perspective by incongruity. Forward then. Perhaps that old pair of antagonists, science and poetry, can be persuaded to lie down together and be generative after all.

2/Literature and the biosphere

What follows can be understood as a contribution to human ecology, specifically, literary ecology, though I use (and transform) a considerable number of concepts from pure, biological ecology.

The problem now, as most ecologists agree, is to find ways of keeping the human community from destroying the natural community, and with it the human community. This is what ecologists like to call the self-destructive or suicidal motive that is inherent in our prevailing and paradoxical attitude toward nature. The conceptual and practical problem is to find the grounds upon which the two communities—the human, the natural—can coexist, cooperate, and flourish in the biosphere. All of the most serious and thoughtful ecologists (such as Aldo Leopold, Ian McHarg, Barry Commoner, and Garret Hardin) have tried to develop ecological visions which can be translated into social, economic, political, and individual programs of action. Ecology has been called, accurately, a subversive science because all these ecological visions are radical ones and attempt to subvert the continued-growth-economy which dominates all emerging and most developed industrial states. A steady or sustainable state economy, with an entirely new concept of growth, is central to all ecological visions. All this may seem rather remote from creating, reading, teaching, and writing about literature; but in fact, it is not. I invoke here (to be spelled out in detail later) the first Law of Ecology: “Everything is connected to everything else.” This is Commoner’s phrasing, but the law is common to all ecologists and all ecological visions. This need to see even the smallest, most remote part in relation to a very large whole is the central intellectual action

required by ecology and of an ecological vision. It is not mind-bending or mind-blowing or mind-boggling; it is mind-expanding. As absurd as this may sound, the paper is about literature and the biosphere. This is no more absurd, of course, than the idea that man does not have the right to do anything he wants with nature. The idea that nature should also be protected by human laws, that trees (dolphins and whales, hawks and whooping cranes) should have lawyers to articulate and defend their rights is one of the most marvelous and characteristic parts of the ecological vision.

3/Energy pathways which sustain life

I'm going to begin with some ecological concepts taken from a great variety of sources more or less randomly arranged and somewhat poetically commented upon.

A poem is stored energy, a formal turbulence, a living thing, a swirl in the flow.

Poems are part of the energy pathways which sustain life.

Poems are a verbal equivalent of fossil fuel (stored energy), but they are a renewable source of energy, coming, as they do, from those ever generative twin matrices, language and imagination.

Some poems—say *King Lear*, *Moby Dick*, *Song of Myself*—seem to be, in themselves, ever-living, inexhaustible sources of stored energy, whose relevance does not derive solely from their meaning, but from their capacity to remain active in any language and to go on with the work of energy transfer, to continue to function as an energy pathway that sustains life and the human community. Unlike fossil fuels, they cannot be used up. The more one thinks about this, the more one realizes that here one encounters a great mystery; here is a radical differential between the ways in which the human world and the natural world sustain life and communities.

Reading, teaching, and critical discourse all release the energy and power stored in poetry so that it may flow through the human community; all energy in nature comes, ultimately, from the sun, and life in the biosphere depends upon a continuous flow of sunlight. In nature, this solar “energy is used once by a given organism or population; some of it is stored and the rest is converted into heat, and is soon lost” from a given ecosystem. The “one-way flow of energy” is a universal phenomenon of nature, where, according to the laws of thermodynamics, energy is never created or destroyed: it is only transformed, degraded, or dispersed, flowing always from a concentrated form into a dispersed (entropic) form. One of the basic formulations of ecology is that there is a one way flow of energy through a system but that materials circulate or are recycled and can be used over and over. Now, without oversimplifying these enormously complex matters, it would seem that once one moves out of the purely biological community and into the human community, where language and symbol-

systems are present, things are not quite the same with regard to energy. The matter is so complex one hesitates to take it on, but one must begin, even hypothetically, somewhere, and try to avoid victimage or neutralization by simple-minded analogical thinking. In literature, all energy comes from the creative imagination. It does not come from language, because language is only one (among many) vehicles for the storing of creative energy. A painting and a symphony are also stored energy. And clearly, this stored energy is not just used once, converted, and lost from the human community. It is perhaps true that the life of the human community depends upon the continuous flow of creative energy (in all its forms) from the creative imagination and intelligence, and that this flow could be considered the sun upon which life in the human community depends; but it is not true that energy stored in a poem—*Song of Myself*—is used once, converted, and then lost from the ecosystem. It is used over and over again as a renewable resource by the same individual. Unlike nature, which has a single ultimate source of energy, the human community would seem to have many suns, resources, renewable and otherwise, to out-sun the sun itself. Literature in general and individual works in particular are one among many human suns. We need to discover ways of using this renewable energy-source to keep that other ultimate energy-source (upon which all life in the natural biosphere, and human communities, including human life, depends) flowing into the biosphere. We need to make some connections between literature and the sun, between teaching literature and the health of the biosphere.

Energy flows from the poet's language centers and creative imagination into the poem and thence, from the poem (which converts and stores this energy) into the reader. Reading is clearly an energy transfer as the energy stored in the poem is released and flows back into the language centers and creative imaginations of the readers. Various human hungers, including word hunger, are satisfied by this energy flow along this particular energy pathway. The concept of a poem as stored energy (as active, alive, and generative, rather than as inert, as a kind of corpse upon which one performs an autopsy, or as an art object one takes possession of, or as an antagonist—a knot of meanings—one must overcome) frees one from a variety of critical tyrannies, most notably, perhaps, that of pure hermeneutics, the transformation of this stored creative energy directly into a set of coherent meanings. What a poem is saying is probably always less important than what it is doing and how—in the deep sense—it coheres. Properly understood, poems can be studied as models for energy flow, community building, and ecosystems. The first Law of Ecology—that everything is connected to everything else—applies to poems as well as to nature. The concept of the interactive field was operative in nature, ecology, and poetry long before it ever appeared in criticism.

Reading, teaching, and critical discourse are enactments of the poem

which release the stored energy so that it can flow into the reader—sometimes with such intensity that one is conscious of an actual inflow; or, if it is in the classroom, one becomes conscious of the extent to which this one source of stored energy is flowing around through a community, and of how “feedback,” negative or positive, is working.

Kenneth Burke was right—as usual—to argue that drama should be our model or paradigm for literature because a drama, enacted upon the stage, before a live audience, releases its energy into the human community assembled in the theater and raises all the energy levels. Burke did not want us to treat novels and poems as plays; he wanted us to become aware of what they were doing as creative verbal actions in the human community. He was one of our first critical ecologists.

Coming together in the classroom, in the lecture hall, in the seminar room (anywhere, really) to discuss or read or study literature, is to gather energy centers around a matrix of stored poetic/verbal energy. In some ways, this is the true interactive field because the energy flow is not just a two-way flow from poem to person as it would be in reading; the flow is along many energy pathways from poem to person, from person to person. The process is triangulated, quadrangulated, multiangulated; and there is, ideally, a raising of the energy levels which makes it possible for the highest motives of literature to accomplish themselves. These motives are not pleasure and truth, but creativity and community.

4/Poems as green plants

Ian McHarg—one of the most profound thinkers I have read who has tried to design a new model of reality based upon ecology—says that “perhaps the greatest conceptual contribution of the ecological view is the perception of the world and evolution as a creative process.” He defines creation as the raising of matter from lower to higher order. In nature, he says, this occurs when some of the sun’s energy is entrapped on its path to entropy. This process of entrapment and creation, he calls—somewhat cacophonously—negentropy, since it negates the negative process of entropy and allows energy to be saved from random dispersal and put to creative ends. Green plants, for example, are among the most creative organisms on earth. They are nature’s poets. There is no end to the ways in which this concept can be applied to the human community, but let me stay close to the topic at hand. Poems are green plants among us; if poets are suns, then poems are green plants among us for they clearly arrest energy on its path to entropy and in so doing, not only raise matter from lower to higher order, but help to create a self-perpetuating and evolving system. That is, they help to create creativity and community, and when their energy is released and flows out into others, to again raise matter from lower to higher order (to use one of the most common descriptions of what

culture is). One of the reasons why teaching and the classroom are so important (for literature, anyway) is that they intensify and continue this process by providing the environment in which the stored energy of poetry can be released to carry on its work of creation and community. The greatest teachers (the best ecologists of the classroom) are those who can generate and release the greatest amount of collective creative energy; they are the ones who understand that the classroom is a community, a true interactive field. Though few of us—maybe none of us—understand precisely how this idea can be used to the ends of biospheric health, its exploration would be one of the central problems which an ecological poetics would have to address.

5/The remorseless inevitableness of things

As a classic textbook by E. Odum on the subject tells us, ecology is always concerned with “levels beyond that of the individual organism. It is concerned with populations, communities, ecosystems, and the biosphere.” By its very nature it is concerned with complex interactions and with the largest sets of interrelationships. We must remember Commoner’s first Law of Ecology: “Everything is connected to everything else.” The biosphere (or ecosphere) is the home that life has built for itself on the planet’s outer surface. In that ecosphere there is a reciprocal interdependence of one life process upon another, and there is a mutual interconnected development of all of the earth’s life systems. If we continue to teach, write, and write about poetry without acknowledging and trying to act upon the fact that—to cite a single example—all the oceans of our home are slowly being contaminated by all the pollutants disposed of in modern communities—even what we try to send up in smoke—then we will soon lose the environment in which we write and teach. All the creative processes of the biosphere, including the human ones, may well come to an end if we cannot find a way to determine the limits of human destruction and intrusion which the biosphere can tolerate, and learn how to creatively manage the biosphere. McHarg and others say that this is our unique creative role, but that as yet we have neither the vision nor the knowledge to carry it out, and that we do not have much more time to acquire both. This somewhat hysterical proposition is why I tried to write this paper and why, true to the experimental motive intrinsic to me as a human being, I have taken on the question of how reading, teaching, and writing about literature might function creatively in the biosphere, to the ends of biospheric purgation, redemption from human intrusions, and health.

As a reader and teacher and critic of literature, I have asked the largest, most important and relevant question about literature that I know how to ask in 1976. It is interesting, to me anyway, that eight years ago, trying to define my position, I was asking questions about the visionary fifth dimen-

sion and about how man is *released from the necessities of nature into this realm of pure being by means of literature*. Four years ago, attempting to do the same thing, I was writing about history as a symbol and about being boxed in the void, convinced that there were no viable concepts of or possibilities for the future, and about literary criticism as a necessary, endlessly dialectical process which helps to keep culture healthy and viable throughout history.² Nothing about nature and the biosphere in all this. Now, in 1976, here I am back on earth (from my heady space trips, from the rigors and pleasures of dialectic, from the histrionic metaphor of being boxed in the void) trying to learn something about what the ecologists variously call the laws of nature, the “body of inescapable natural laws,” the “impotence principles” which are beyond our ability to alter or escape, the remorseless inevitableness of things, the laws of nature which are “decrees of fate.” I have been trying to learn something by contemplating (from my vantage point in literature) one of ecology’s basic maxims: “We are not free to violate the laws of nature.” The view we get of humans in the biosphere from the ecologists these days is a tragic one, as pure and classic as the Greek or Shakespearean views: in partial knowledge or often in total ignorance (the basic postulate of ecology and tragedy is that humans precipitate tragic consequences by acting either in ignorance of or without properly understanding the true consequences of their actions), we are violating the laws of nature, and the retribution from the biosphere will be more terrible than any inflicted on humans by the gods. In ecology, man’s tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision, and his compulsion to conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing. The ecological nightmare (as one gets it in Brunner’s *The Sheep Look Up*) is of a monstrously overpopulated, almost completely polluted, all but totally humanized planet. These nightmares are all *if/then* projections: *if* everything continues as is, *then* this will happen. A common form of this nightmare is Garret Hardin’s ironic population projection: if we continue our present 2% growth rate indefinitely, then in only 615 years there will be standing room only on all the land areas of the world.

To simply absorb this tragic ecological view of our present and possible futures (if nothing occurs to alter our anthropocentric vision) into the doomsday syndrome is a comforting but specious intellectual, critical, and historical response: it dissipates action into the platitudes of purely archetypal and intellectual connections. Better to bring Shakespearean and Greek tragedy to bear upon our own biosphere’s tragedy as a program for action than this—anyday. I will not attempt to deal here with the responses to the tragic/doomsday ecological view generated by a commitment to the economic growth spiral or the national interest. Others have done it better than I ever could. Let me say here that the evidence is so overwhelming and terrifying that I can no longer even imagine (using any vision) the possi-

bility of ignoring Ian McHarg's mandate in his sobering and brilliant book, *Design With Nature*:

Each individual has a responsibility for the entire biosphere
and is required to engage in creative and cooperative activities.

As readers, teachers, and critics of literature, we are used to asking ourselves questions—often very complex and sophisticated ones—about the nature of literature, critical discourse, language, curriculum, liberal arts, literature and society, literature and history; but McHarg has proposed new concepts of creativity and community so radical that it is even hard to comprehend them. As readers, teachers and critics of literature, how do we become responsible planet stewards? How do we ask questions about literature and the biosphere? What do we even ask? These are overwhelming questions. They fill one with a sense of futility and absurdity and provoke one's self-irony at the first faint soundings of the still largely ignorant, preaching, pontificating voice. How does one engage in responsible creative and cooperative biospheric action as a reader, teacher (especially this), and critic of literature? I think that we have to begin answering this question and that we should do what we have always done: turn to the poets. And then to the ecologists. We must formulate an ecological poetics. We must promote an ecological vision. At best, I can only begin here. Following McHarg and rephrasing a fine old adage, we can say that "where there is no ecological vision, the people will perish." And this ecological vision must penetrate the economic, political, social, and technological visions of our time, and radicalize them. The problem is not national, but global, planetary. It will not stop here. As Arthur Boughey points out, "There is no population, community, or ecosystem left on earth completely independent of the effects of human cultural behavior. Now [this human] influence has begun to spread beyond the globe to the rest of our planetary system and even to the universe itself."

6/The central paradox: powerless visions

One has to begin somewhere. Since literature is our business, let us begin with the poets or creators in this field and see if we can move toward a generative poetics by connecting poetry to ecology. As should be clear by now, I am not just interested in transferring ecological concepts to the study of literature, but in attempting to see literature inside the context of an ecological vision in ways which restrict neither and do not lead merely to proselytizing based upon a few simple generalizations and perceptions which have been common to American literature (at least) since Cooper, and are central to the whole transcendental vision as one gets it in Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and Melville. As Barry Commoner points out, "The

complex web in which all life is enmeshed, and man's place in it, are clearly—and beautifully—described in the poems of Walt Whitman,” in Melville's *Moby Dick* and everywhere in Emerson and Thoreau. “Unfortunately,” he says, with a kind of unintentional, but terrible understatement for literary people, “this literary heritage has not been enough to save us from ecological disaster.” And here we are, back again before we even start, to the paradoxes which confront us as readers, teachers, and critics of literature—and perhaps as just plain citizens: the separation of vision and action; the futility of vision and knowledge without power.

7/The harshest, cruelest realities of our profession

Bringing literature and ecology together is a lesson in the harshest, cruelest realities which permeate our profession: we live by the word, and by the power of the word, but are increasingly powerless to act upon the word. Real power in our time is political, economic, and technological; real knowledge is increasingly scientific. Are we not here at the center of it all? We can race our verbal motors, spin our dialectical wheels, build more and more sophisticated systems, recycle dazzling ideas through the elite of the profession. We can keep going by charging ourselves back up in the classroom. In the end, we wonder what it all comes down to. Reading Commoner's (or almost any other serious ecologist's) statements, knowing they come from a formidable scientific knowledge, from direct involvement with the problems and issue from a deeply committed human being, can we help but wonder what we are doing teaching students to love poetry, to take literature seriously, to write good papers about literature:

Because the global ecosystem is a connected whole, in which nothing can be gained or lost and which is not subject to overall improvement, anything extracted from it by human effort must be replaced. Payment of this price cannot be avoided; it can only be delayed. The present environmental crisis is a warning that we have delayed nearly too long.

. . . we are in an environmental crisis because the means by which we use the ecosphere to produce wealth are destructive of the ecosystem itself. The present system of production is self-destructive. The present course of human civilization is suicidal. In our unwitting march toward ecological suicide we have run out of options. Human beings have broken out of the circle of life, driven not by biological need, but by social organization which they have devised to conquer nature . . .

All my literary training tells me that this is not merely rhetoric, and that no amount of rhetoric or manipulation of the language to political, economic, technological, or other ends, will make it go away. It is a substantive, biosphere-wide reality we must confront and attempt to do something about.

I will use what I know best and begin with the poets. If we begin with the poets (who have never had any doubts about the seriousness and relevance of what they are doing), they teach us that literature is an enormous, ever increasing, wonderfully diverse storehouse of creative and cooperative energy which can never be used up. It is like the gene-pool, like the best ecosystems. Literature is a true cornucopia, thanks to the continuous generosity of the poets, who generate this energy out of themselves, requiring, and usually receiving, very little in return over and above the feedback from the creative act itself.

This is probably nowhere more evident than in a book such as Gary Snyder's *Turtle Island*; or, to take quite a different kind of text, in Adrienne Rich's *Diving Into the Wreck*. What the poets do is "Hold it close" and then "give it all away." What Snyder holds close and gives away in *Turtle Island* is a complete ecological vision which has worked down into every detail of his personal life and is the result of many years of intellectual and personal wandering. Every poem is an action which comes from a finely developed and refined ecological conscience and consciousness. The book enacts a whole program of ecological action; it is offered (like *Walden*) as a guide book. It has in it one of the most useful and complete concepts of renewable, creative human energy which can be put to creative and cooperative biospheric ends that I know of. Its relevance for this paper is probably so obvious that I should not pursue it any longer.

The Generosity of Adrienne Rich's Diving into the Wreck. Things are very different in this book of poems, and not immediately applicable to the topic of this paper. But this book is the epitome—for me—of the ways in which poets are generous with themselves and can be used as models for creative, cooperative action. Without exception, the poems in this book are about the ecology of the female self, and they impinge upon the concerns of this paper in their treatment of men as destroyers (here of women rather than of the biosphere, but for remarkably similar reasons). As Margaret Atwood's profound ecological novel, *Surfacing*, makes clear, there is a demonstrable relationship between the ways in which men treat and destroy women and the ways in which men treat and destroy nature. Many of the poems—and in particular a poem such as "The Phenomenology of Anger"—are about how one woman changed and brought this destruction and suppression to an end, and about what changes must occur to bring the whole process to an end. A mind familiar with ecology cannot avoid the many profound and disturbing connections to be made here between women and western history, nature and western history.

The Deconstructive Wisdom of W. S. Merwin's :Lice. One of the most contin-

uously shattering experiences of my intellectual life has been the reading, teaching, and thenceforth re-reading and re-teaching of this book of poems. This is one of the most profound books of poems written in our time and one of the great ecological texts of any time. Whatever has been argued from factual, scientific, historical, and intellectual evidence in the ecology books that I read is confirmed (and more) by the imaginative evidence of this book of poems. Merwin's generosity consists in the extraordinary efforts he made to deconstruct the cumulative wisdom of western culture and then imaginatively project himself into an almost unbearable future. Again, as with Adrienne Rich, these poems are about the deep inner changes which must occur if we are to keep from destroying the world and survive as human beings. I know of no other book of poems so aware of the biosphere and what humans have done to destroy it as this one. Reading this book of poems requires one to unmake and remake one's mind. It is the most painfully constructive book of poems I think I have ever read. What these poems affirm over and over is that if a new ecological vision is to emerge, the old destructive western one must be deconstructed and abandoned. This is exactly what Rich's poems say about men and women.

The Energy of Love in Walt Whitman's Song of Myself. This energy flows out of Whitman into the world (all the things of the world) and back into Whitman from the things of the world in one of the most marvelous ontological interchanges one can find anywhere in poetry. This ontological interchange between Whitman and the biosphere is the energy pathway that sustains life in Whitman and, so far as he is concerned, in the biosphere. There is a complete ecological vision in this poem, just as there is in Whitman's conception of a poetry cycle which resembles the water cycle within the biosphere. Whitman says that poems come out of the poets, go up into the atmosphere to create a kind of poetic atmosphere, come down upon us in the form of poetic rain, nourish us and make us creative and then are recycled. Without this poetic atmosphere and cultural cycle, he says, we would die as human beings. A lovely concept, and true for some of us, but it has not yet resolved the disjunction (as Commoner points out) between vision and action, knowledge and power.

The Biocentric Vision of Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! Can we not study this great fiction, and its central character, Thomas Sutpen, in relation to one of the most fundamental of all ecological principles: "That nature is an interacting process, a seamless web, that it [nature] is responsive to laws, that it constitutes a value system with intrinsic opportunities and constraints upon human use." There is an ecological lesson for all of us in the ferocious destructiveness of human and natural things brought about by Thomas Sutpen.

Looking upon the World, Listening and Learning with Henry David Thoreau. Does he not tell us that this planet, and the creatures who inhabit it, including men and women, were, have been, are now, and are in the process of becoming? A beautiful and true concept of the biosphere. His model of reality was so new, so radical even in the mid-nineteenth century, that we have still not been able to absorb and act upon it more than a hundred years later.

Entropy and Negentropy in Theodore Roethke's "Greenhouse," "Lost Son," and "North American Sequence." Was there ever a greater ecological, evolutionary poet of the self than Roethke, one who really believed that ontology recapitulates phylogeny, one so close to his evolutionary predecessors that he experiences an interchange of being with them and never demeans them with personification and seldom with metaphor. Kenneth Burke's brilliant phrase—vegetal radicalism—still takes us to the ecological centers of Roethke, self-absorbed, self-obsessed as he was.

But enough of this. The poets have always been generous. I mean only to suggest a few ecological readings of texts I know well. Teaching and criticism are the central issues here, so let me move on toward some conclusions.

9/Teaching and critical discourse as forms of symbiosis

"Creativeness is a universal prerequisite which man shares with all creatures." The central, modern idea of the poet, of literature, and of literary criticism is based upon the postulate that humans are capable of genuine creation and that literature is one of the enactments of this creative principle. Taking literature to ecology by way of McHarg's statement joins two principles of creativity so that humans are acting in concert with the rest of the biosphere, but not necessarily to the ends of biospheric health. That has always been the problem. Some of our most amazing creative achievements—say in chemistry and physics—have been our most destructive. Culture—one of our great achievements wherever we have gone—has often fed like a great predator and parasite upon nature and never entered into a reciprocating energy-transfer, into a recycling relationship with the biosphere. In fact, one of the most common antinomies in the human mind is between culture/civilization, and nature/wilderness. As Kenneth Burke pointed out some time ago, man's tendency is to become rotten with perfection. As Burke ironically formulated it, man's entelechy is technology. Perceiving and teaching (even writing about) human creativity in this larger ecological context could be done in all literature courses and especially in all creative writing courses. It could only have a salutary effect. It

would make the poet and the green plants brothers and sisters; it would charge creative writing and literature with ecological purpose.

Symbiosis, according to McHarg, is the “cooperative arrangement that permits increase in the levels of order”; it is this cooperative arrangement that permits the use of energy in raising the levels of matter. McHarg says that symbiosis makes negentropy possible; he identifies negentropy as the creative principle and process at work in the biosphere which keeps everything moving in the evolutionary direction which has characterized the development of all life in the biosphere. Where humans are involved and where literature provides the energy source within the symbiotic arrangement, McHarg says that a very complex process occurs in which energy is transmuted into information and thence into meaning by means of a process he calls apperception. As McHarg demonstrated in his book, both the process of apperception and the meaning which results from it can be used to creative, cooperative ends in our management of the biosphere. The central endeavor, then, of any ecological poetics would have to be a working model for the processes of transformation which occur as one moves from the stored creative energy of the poem, to its release by reading, teaching, or writing, to its transmutation into meaning and finally, to its application, in an ecological value system, to what McHarg variously calls “fitness and fitting,” and to “health”—which he defines as “creative fitting” and by which he means to suggest our creation of a fit environment. This work could transform culture and help bring our destruction of the biosphere to an end.

Now there is no question that literature can do all this, but there are a lot of questions as to whether it does in fact do it, how, and how effectively. All these concerns might well be central for teachers and critics of literature these days. We tend to over-refine our conceptual frameworks so that they can only be used by a corps of elitist experts and gradually lose their practical *relevance* as they increase their theoretical *elegance*. I am reminded here of the stridently practical questions Burke asked all through the thirtys and early forties and of the scorn with which they were so often greeted by literary critics and historians of his time. But none of these questions is antithetical to literature and there is a certain splendid resonance which comes from thinking of poets and green plants being engaged in the same creative, life-sustaining activities, and of teachers and literary critics as creative mediators between literature and the biosphere whose tasks include the encouragement of, the discovery, training, and development of creative biospheric apperceptions, attitudes, and actions. To charge the classroom with ecological purpose one has only to begin to think of it in symbiotic terms as a cooperative arrangement which makes it possible to release the stream of energy which flows out of the poet and into the poem, out of the poem and into the readers, out of the readers and into the classroom, and then back into the readers and out of the classroom with them, and finally

back into the other larger community in a never ending circuit of life.

10/But . . .

I stop here, short of action, halfway between literature and ecology, the energy pathways obscured, the circuits of life broken between words and actions, vision and action, the verbal domain and the non-verbal domain, between literature and the biosphere—because I can't go any further. The desire to join literature to ecology originates out of and is sustained by a Merwin-like condition and question: how can we apply the energy, the creativity, the knowledge, the vision we know to be in literature to the human-made problems ecology tells us are destroying the biosphere which is our home? How can we translate literature into purgative-redemptive biospheric action; how can we resolve the fundamental paradox of this profession and get out of our heads? How can we turn words into something other than more words (poems, rhetoric, lectures, talks, position papers—the very substance of an MLA meeting: millions and millions of words; endlessly recirculating among those of us in the profession); how can we do something more than recycle WORDS?

Let experimental criticism address itself to this dilemma.

How can we move from the community of literature to the larger biospheric community which ecology tells us (correctly, I think) we belong to even as we are destroying it?

Free us from figures of speech.

NOTES

I have not documented all of the quotations from, paraphrases of, and references to ecological works because there are so many of them and I wanted the paper to be read right through. The paper is literally a kind of patchwork of ecological material. I have identified my major sources and resources in the bibliography. The only things I felt should be identified were my own works because the references to them would be obscure and quite incomprehensible otherwise.

1. In "Literary Criticism and History: The Endless Dialectic," *New Literary History*, VI (1974-75), 491-512.
2. Respectively, in:
 - a) "Kenneth Burke and Structuralism," *Shenandoah*, XXI (Autumn, 1969), 19-28
 - b) "Literary Criticism and History."
 - c) "History as Symbol: Boxed in the Void," above.

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